The Impact of Document Design on Alcohol-Harm Awareness

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This project examines how the consequences of alcohol consumption could be more effectively communicated to college students in written media. It analyzes documents about alcohol use and abuse and explores how document design impacts the reader’s perception of the message.

Every year, an estimated 1,800 college students die because of an alcohol-related accident or injury\(^1\). Alcohol is involved in almost 97,000 college sexual assaults and nearly 700,000 college verbal or physical assaults\(^2\), yet nearly 80% of college students drink alcohol, and half of those individuals also participate in binge drinking\(^3\). These facts indicate that a disconnect exists between the statistics on alcohol harm and students’ attitudes toward intoxication.

To study possible solutions for this disconnect, I analyzed current health and wellness campaigns, created two proposed campaigns (consisting of websites, flyers, t-shirts, and stickers) on the topic of alcohol use and abuse, and hypothesized that students would prefer a more lighthearted campaign since it brought unexpected levity to a serious topic. To test this hypothesis, I recruited current Auburn students to give feedback on the designs in an IRB-approved study (Protocol #18-291 EX 1810). Although I visited four different classes at Auburn University to recruit participants, I had a low turnout (four participants). I gathered qualitative data from the participants by observing them interact with a display of the documents, conducting individual interviews, and collecting written responses via an online survey.

Campaign 1 had bright yellows and greens, a cartoon character, and decorative fonts, aimed to evoke feelings of humor and interest within the reader, and Campaign 2 had calm blues and whites, images of water, and sans serif fonts, which aimed to evoke images of tranquility and professionalism. One student noted that they were initially attracted to Campaign 1 because of the bright colors, but said that its content was “childish,” whereas Campaign 2 was professional. Another participant stated that Campaign 1 “didn’t look childish, but it looked like it was aimed for a younger audience.” The participants based their comments on font, color, and tone, noting that the blues in Campaign 2 made it seem “calm” and “professional.”

In addition to these data, the participants provided feedback on specific elements of each campaign (such as content, genre, use of images) and whether those elements contributed positively or negatively to their impression of the documents. However, further research with increased participants will be needed to detect conclusive trends. These initial findings suggest that college students prefer documents that maintain a professional voice, but more research is needed to validate this conclusion. The data did reveal that document design plays an important role in receptiveness to content, and further research might focus on how participants’ genders, backgrounds, and viewpoints on alcohol also affect their interactions with the documents’ designs.

Statement of Research Advisor

Ms. Martin has conducted extensive primary research, including observations, interviews, surveys, and artifact analyses. She took the initiative to pursue Institutional Research Board (IRB) approval because she sought feedback from human subjects through a focus group. Her methods and her findings make an important contribution to the field of rhetoric and composition in the areas of document design, visual rhetoric, and usability studies.

– Diana Eidson, English

References


\(^2\) Ibid.